THE PRICE

Captain James T. Kirk ticked off the last item on his agenda for the staff meeting. Spock, McCoy and Scotty were gathered around the displays at the briefing room table. Gavin Lapsley, the security chief had made his report and been excused early on.

"The computer says there's been a statistically significant increase in injuries this month, Bones. What's the matter--are we getting careless?" That had been known to happen to a highly trained crew when nothing, nothing exciting, happened for months on end. It had been a long, dull day in a long, dull month.

"Could be. There hasn't been anything serious. Just bumps and bruises."

"For example?" Kirk stifled a yawn. Even Spock didn't seem interested in the computer's comments. But boredom was no excuse. If there was something wrong on his ship, the Captain had to know about it.

McCoy dropped a data cube into the tabletop and indicated a chart that appeared holographically in the center of the table.

"Kirk, James T., contusions and lacerations, lower back pain. Cause: workout. Scott, Montgomery, second degree burn. Cause: releasing a malfunctioning coupling manually. Chapel, Christine, contusion, never mind where. Cause: slipped in the shower. It's all like that."

Unable to see a pattern, Kirk gestured for the doctor to go on.

"Patmos, Crissy, pulled a tendon in her knee tumbling. Darryl Dubois broke a finger, don't ask me how, building a musical instrument. Martin Reishoff got a fat lip walking into a door--you'd think someone would come up with a new excuse, wouldn't you?"

"They need shore leave," was Kirk's comment. "What else?"

"Uhura bumped her head down on Arete."

Kirk grinned. He'd seen that. She almost scared him to death tumbling down the steep side of a newly uncovered pyramid the archaeologists were going crazy over. When McCoy had certified her OK, Kirk had been as aggravated as a parent whose child has not broken his neck.

"I don't see anything for her to trip over," he had announced, steadying her limp form against his shoulder.

"You wouldn't," McCoy had replied cryptically as he sprayed a wake-up into her arm. "But every male below command rank has noticed a certain abstraction in the ladies when Dray T'serek is around." McCoy had nodded at the crewman tractoring debris off the crown of the pyramid.

Kirk had noticed and dismissed the boy's good looks when he reported aboard. According to his chief's report he did his job well. And he couldn't be over twenty. Uhura's taste didn't usually run to pretty babies. Her warm weight was a reminder of all the wealth she could bring to an appreciative audience. But mooning over a mere teenager--she had come to, realized that the shoulder supporting her was clad in command gold, and beat a dignified retreat which Kirk had watched with appreciation.

"Uhura's usually too conscientious to let her private life interfere with duty."

"Just like you," McCoy had agreed too blandly, and Kirk had steered clear of a discussion he couldn't win. But it wasn't likely that had anything to do with shipboard ills.

"I think it's just a matter of new crew, Jim. It takes people a while to settle in."

"Ok, Bones, you're the doctor. But if it keeps up, let me know. Anthing else, gentlemen?"

The stir around the table indicated the others were as ready to quit for the day as he was, Scotty to his gadgets, McCoy to fuss in the lab and Spock to pursue some really interesting problem.

"Dismissed, then. I'm heading for the gym. Anybody want to take me on?"

The you-must-be-kidding look was general. Kirk's favorite form of exercise was a free for all in heavy gravity and he played hard. He had to, just as he had to match wits with Spock over the chessboard, and take on the computer at war games. The day he quit playing to win and rested on his laurels might be the day it was all for real again and four hundred lives hung on his reflexes.

"Come on, Bones. You're always saying we need exercise."

"I give those prescriptions; I don't have to take them."

"And I like my bones the way they are," Scott protested.

"Spock?" Kirk looked expectantly at the Vulcan.

"My research on the musical notation of the Amhaar golden age--"

Kirk's woebegone look was barefaced manipulation, but the Vulcan relented.

"--however, if you can find no other partner..."

"Your enthusiasm overwhelms me, Mr. Spock. I accept."

When Spock and Kirk padded barefoot into the gym a crowd around the variable-G mats drew their interest. Per Kirk's standing order rank carried no special privileges in the gym and they shouldered through the onlookers with no more than a casual exchange of greetings. The gravity indicator was set high, almost two G's, and three security men were circling a chestnut-haired youngster that Kirk recognized only because he'd been recently reminded of him. It was Dray T'serek, and Kirk thought the boy must fancy himself at those odds. A moment later he saw why as the trio moved in. T'serek sent one man tumbling twelve feet into the crowd, popped a second over his shoulder, and was just barely brought down by the third. As the two bodies tangled on the mat Kirk picked up a slight movement of protest from Spock, then relaxation as the third attacker was thrown off. Kirk felt a slight stir in the crowd before they rushed forward to congratulate the winner.

"What was his record on his other ships?"

"Excellent, Captain. He served four months on the Thermopolae, was promoted on transfer to the McCellend, and promoted again when he transferred here."